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Britain's changed electoral map in and beyond 2015: the importance of geography

Three geographical elements play major roles in the operation of the UK's electoral system: the geography of support – how spatially segregated each party's voters are; the geographical clustering of those segregated areas; and the constituency boundaries within which those geographies are nested. In the period from 1970-2010 as a result of the interaction of these three, Britain's apparent three-party system (four-party in Scotland and Wales) was represented in a series of geographically separate two-party systems. At the 2015 election, although there was little change in support for the two largest parties from the overall situation in 2010, there were substantial changes in the volume and geography of support for the five smaller parties. Those latter changes produced very different geographies in 2015 from those in 2010, with major likely consequences for the next contest in 2020.

KEY WORDS: general election, 2015, Great Britain, electoral geography

Several aspects of the results of the 2015 UK general election – the Conservatives' 'sweetest victory' (Bale and Webb 2015; Seldon and Snowdon 2015) – have attracted considerable media and academic attention (e.g. Tonge and Geddes 2015; Cowley and Kavanagh 2015). Many commentators have noted the apparent anomalies produced by the electoral system (e.g. Curtice, 2015) – one party got 12.9 per cent of the votes cast but only one MP, for example, whereas another got 8.1 per cent of the votes and 8 MPs and a third with 4.9 per cent of the votes got 50 of the seats in the House of Commons. Less attention has been paid to other elements of the results, however, and their profound implications for the contest at the next election in 2020. Many of those other elements reflect the important role of geography in the translation of votes into seats, and are the focus of the current analysis of the results.

Britain's electoral geography

Analyses of Britain's electoral geography – from Gudgin and Taylor's (1979) classic work on – have stressed the importance of three elements of that geography crucial in determining the translation of votes into seats. It was well-established that the British first-past-the-post (plurality) electoral system normally delivered disproportional outcomes, with the lesser parties getting a smaller percentage share of the seats in the House of Commons than their percentage share of the votes cast whereas the biggest parties – especially that winning most votes – got a disproportionately large share of seats relative to votes, what was generally accepted as a 'winner's bonus'. Gudgin and Taylor further established – as extensive later research has confirmed (Johnston et al. 2001; Johnston 2015) – that this disproportionality did not treat the parties equally. The system not only produced disproportional outcomes but also biased ones.

Gudgin and Taylor's modelling showed that both the disproportionality and the bias were the product of three elements of the geography underpinning the system for translating votes into seats: the geography of support for each of the parties – how spatially segregated each party's voters were from its opponents' supporters; the geography of clustering of those segregated areas – the degree to which each party's supporters were concentrated in particular spatial segments of the country; and the geography of the constituency boundaries within which the votes were counted.

They showed that, holding the first two geographies constant, details of the configuration of constituency boundaries could significantly affect the outcome of an election in any one area. Thus, for example, Johnston and Rossiter's (1983) extension of Gudgin and Taylor's work showed that in Sheffield although most divisions of the city into six constituencies in the 1960s, using wards as the building blocks (as in the work of the Boundary Commissions that recommend constituency boundaries), would result in Labour winning five of the city's six seats, nevertheless some of the possible divisions could see Labour win all six seats, whereas others would see them win only four. Without any changes to the underlying map of Labour's support across Sheffield, changes to the constituency boundaries could alter the partisan balance of its complement of MPs. Whereas this situation applied in some other – mainly urban – places, elsewhere whatever the constituency boundaries the outcome in terms of the number of seats won would not change (Johnston and Rossiter 1983; Johnston et al. 2001, Chapter 6) because of the geography of party support there.

These early analyses of the impact of changed constituency boundaries related to a situation in which two parties – Conservative and Labour – won a substantial majority of the votes cast at each general election and an even greater majority of the Parliamentary seats (Figure 1); those two parties occupied the first and second places in most of the British (i.e. excluding Northern Irish¹) constituencies. This was changing by the mid-1970s, however, as a consequence of the resurgence of support for the Liberal party across Britain and the increased popularity of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales (the Scottish National Party – SNP – and Plaid Cymru respectively). This did not mean that most English constituencies became three-party contests, however. Although the Liberal party (and its later successors: we use the term 'Liberal Democrats' to refer to all these variants) fielded candidates in an increasing number of (and eventually almost all) British constituencies,² nevertheless their vote-winning was concentrated in a only relatively small proportion of them. This initial concentration of support was largely won at the expense of the Labour party, and mainly in constituencies in southern England. In 1979, the Liberals occupied either first or second place alongside the Conservatives in 98 seats, having pushed Labour into third place, but shared first and second places with Labour in only five: 511 of the country's 623 constituencies at that election had the Conservatives and Labour occupying the first two places, with the Liberals in most cases in a distant third place (Table 1: Johnston and Pattie, 2011).

Over time, the Liberal Democrats became the Conservatives' main challenger in an increasing number of (still mainly southern English) seats – 282 and 246 at the 1983 and 1987 elections, for example, when Labour's support was at its late twentieth-century nadir (Table 1). Somewhat later, the Liberal Democrats (in part building upon the SDP foundations there and later developing support among student populations on the basis of their opposition to the 2003 Iraq War and the imposition of university fees) began to challenge Labour's hegemony in some northern urban areas (in the local governments there as well as in the contests for seats in the House of Commons), replacing the Conservatives as Labour's main opponent. Thus by the time of the 1997 general election, of the country's 633 constituencies, 335 had the Conservatives and Labour occupying the first two places, 126 had the former plus the Liberal Democrats in those positions, and in another 124 the first two places were occupied by Labour and the Liberal Democrats (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). Only 48 constituencies – mainly in Scotland and Wales where the SNP and PC (each now contesting all constituencies in its own country) occupied either first or second place in an increasing number of seats – were outside these three main groups.

In effect, therefore, electorally Britain at the start of the 21st century was not characterised by a three-party system on the ground, however it appeared in the percentage distribution of votes across the parties nationally and in the allocation of House of Commons seats. Rather it comprised three separate two-party systems. And it was the same again in 2005 (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). Labour's electoral decline at the next, 2010, election – relative to both the Conservatives and the

Liberal Democrats – saw the situation change somewhat: the respective number of seats in each category changed to 286, 204 and 95 (Table 1): the Conservatives came either first or second in 491 seats (78% of the total), Labour in 382 and the Liberal Democrats in 300. Nevertheless, the number in the Other category remained virtually unchanged – with almost all of them in Scotland and Wales. In England, and also most of Wales, the country was still dominated by three, two-party systems.

As indicated above, one of the features of each of these two-party sub-systems was that in general the third party came a relatively poor third, as shown by the average vote cast for each party in each group (Table 2). There were very few three-party marginal seats (defined as those in which two other parties were both no more than ten percentage points behind the winner). Going in to the 2015 contest, the country was dominated by three groups of seats in each of which only two parties had a reasonable chance of success – unless there was a major change in their respective fortunes.

The 2015 general election

With no party winning an overall majority at the 2010 general election, the United Kingdom was governed by a Conservative:Liberal Democrat coalition for the next five years. Over that period, the Liberal Democrats suffered a major fall in their popularity according to opinion polls, which suggested that their vote share might be reduced by about two-thirds of its 2010 total (23 per cent); Labour and the Conservatives each polled between 30-37 per cent at almost all polls leading up to the next election (Denver, 2015). The polls also showed substantial growth in support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which campaigned for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and strict restrictions on immigration: UKIP had gained most votes (26.6 per cent) at the 2014 European Parliament elections, and opinion polls suggested that it would get about half of that share at the 2015 general election. The other major shift was the growth in support for the SNP – especially after the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014, which those supporting separation lost by 45:55.

Many features of the result of the election on 7 May 2015 were consistent with expectations based on the extensive polling reported in the media, except that whereas – virtually until election day itself – the Conservatives and Labour were expected to have very similar vote shares, in the end they were 6.5 percentage points apart, a result little different from the previous contest in 2010. There was a small swing of 0.4 percentage points only from the Conservatives to Labour but, as a result of changes in the performance of the other parties, the Conservatives increased their share of the seats and were able to form a majority government (Table 3). Only 18 seats changed hands between the two main parties, as the transition matrix in Table 3 shows: Labour won ten from the Conservatives, but lost eight to them.

Compared to these slight changes in the performance of the two largest parties, there were substantial shifts in the performance of their smaller rivals, shifts that were crucial not only to the overall outcome in terms of government formation and the composition of the House of Commons but also, as we detail below, to the electoral map that will form the template within which the next general election will be fought in 2020. Those shifts were:

1. The Liberal Democrat vote collapsed as anticipated, from 23.6 to 8.1 per cent of the total, resulting in their number of MPs falling from 57 after the 2010 election to 8; the Conservatives defeated the Liberal Democrats in 27 seats as did Labour in a further seven and the SNP in 10 (Table 3).
2. The SNP's share of the votes cast increased from 1.7 to 4.9 (20.0 to 50.1 per cent in Scotland alone) and it won 56 of the 59 Scottish seats, having only six in the previous Parliament. It won 40 seats from Labour and 10 from the Liberal Democrats, leaving each with only a single constituency MP in Scotland; the Conservatives retained their single seat there.

3. UKIP became the third largest party in England, with 12.9 per cent of the votes (a fourfold increase over its 2010 performance) but gained only one seat (won initially by a defector from the Conservatives at a 2014 by-election).

The geographies of those shifts illustrate very clearly the impact of the three elements of the translation of votes into seats identified by Gudgin and Taylor. The SNP with 4.9 per cent of the votes won 8.9 per cent of Britain's 632 seats, because those votes were spatially very concentrated in one UK region only, whereas UKIP gained a single seat with 12.9 per cent and the Liberal Democrats got eight MPs (1.2 per cent of the total) with 8.1 per cent of the votes. For both of the latter two parties, their votes were spread too uniformly across the country. Very few seats have been won at recent British general elections by a party with less than 30 per cent of the votes there (Borisjuk et al., 2012), and only 46 were won in 2015 with less than 40 per cent (18 by the Conservatives, 20 by Labour, five by the Liberal Democrats, two by the SNP, and one by Plaid Cymru). A party with less than one-third of the votes overall thus needs its support to be concentrated in a relatively small number of seats if it is to return MPs to the House. None of the Liberal Democrat, UKIP and Green parties met this criterion substantially in 2015. The Liberal Democrats' mean constituency share was 7.8 per cent, with a standard deviation of 8.4: it exceeded 30 per cent in 31 seats, of which it won eight; it won less than 20 per cent of the votes in 571 of the seats and less than 10 per cent in 508. UKIP's pattern of votes was even less favourable. It gained more than 30 per cent of the votes in just eight constituencies (winning one with 44.4 per cent) and it got less than 20 per cent in 563. In a proportional electoral system, those two parties could have expected to win some 51 and 82 seats respectively. In Britain's plurality system the geography of their votes meant that they obtained only a fraction of those figures. The same applied to the Green Party, which won 3.8 per cent of the votes across Great Britain but just one seat: it won over 20 per cent of the votes in just two constituencies.

Whereas the Parliamentary representation of the parties just discussed was proportionally much smaller than their share of the votes as a consequence of the geography of their support, geography worked to the SNP's favour, because of the concentration of its votes in some parts of the country only. Indeed, the party's performance illustrated a further feature of the disproportionalities created by the plurality system: with a large share of the votes, parties tend to get not only an even larger share of the seats but also, if those votes are relatively evenly distributed across all constituencies, hegemony is a likely outcome. Indeed, across Scotland's 59 constituencies the SNP's mean vote share was 50.2 per cent, with a standard deviation of only 7.0; its largest share was 61.9 and its smallest 33.8, and it gained less than 40 per cent in only five seats (two of which it won, along with all 50 of the others where its share exceeded that threshold). Plaid Cymru, to a lesser extent, also illustrated the benefits of an 'efficient' vote distribution. It gained 12.1 per cent of the votes cast in Wales, and won three (7.5 per cent) of the country's forty seats. Its votes were much more unevenly distributed than the SNP's, with a mean percentage of 12.8 and a standard deviation of 10.6: it gained over 30 per cent of the votes in just four constituencies (of which it won three, all with 38 per cent or more) but 10 per cent or less in over half of the Welsh seats. If that 12.1 per cent had been more evenly distributed across Wales, like UKIP across Britain as a whole, Plaid Cymru would have struggled to get any MPs.

Moving forward?

Little changed in the core of the British party system between 2010 and 2015, therefore: the two largest parties together obtained 66.7 per cent of the votes cast at the former of those contests and 69 per cent at the latter. But there was considerable change in the periphery: the collapse of the Liberal Democrats and the rise of both the SNP and UKIP (and also the Greens). And that

considerable change has resulted in a major redrawing of the country's electoral map, with very substantial consequences for the next and subsequent elections.

A changing electoral map I: who is contesting whom, where?

The first component of that new map is identified by the final two rows in Table 1. After the 2010 election, all but 46 of the country's constituencies were in one of three types according to which parties were the main contestants there (and of those 46, 30 were Labour:SNP contests). After the 2015 election, the number in that 'Other' category had quadrupled to 196: 42 of them were constituencies where Labour and the SNP occupied the first two places but a further 120 were in two new types, of which there had been no representatives five years earlier. In 76 constituencies, the Conservatives and UKIP occupied the first two places and in a further 44 those places were occupied by Labour and UKIP. The emergence of these new contest types resulted from UKIP's rise to be Britain's third party and the Liberal Democrats' decline to a distant fourth place. After the 2010 election, the Liberal Democrats occupied either first or second place in 299 seats; five years later that number had fallen by four-fifths to 61, with many of them either seeing UKIP replace the Liberal Democrats as the second-placed party or becoming (once again) a contest between the two main parties – the number of seats with the Labour and Conservative candidates occupying the first two places increased from 287 to 376.

The current electoral map is thus more complex than its predecessor, as shown in the two equal-area cartograms in Figure 2 (each constituency has the same area in these hexagons, to avoid the exaggerated influence of rural areas in conventional maps³). In 2010 (Figure 2a) constituencies in the three southern regions outside London (East; Southeast; and Southwest – the regional boundaries are shown in white) were predominantly contests between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, whereas elsewhere in England the two other types (Conservative:Labour and Labour:Liberal Democrat) dominated. The 2015 map (Figure 2b) is dominated by the Conservative:Labour contests: those with the Conservatives and UKIP occupying the first two places are almost entirely in southern England; Labour:UKIP contests are predominantly in England's three northern regions; and most of the remaining Conservative:Liberal Democrat contests are in the Southwest region.

Table 4 further illustrates this changing regional map of party contests in England. Of the 158 seats in the three northern regions, for example, 31 (almost all of them in the major conurbations) had Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates occupying the first two places in 2010, but only six constituencies did five years later. At that second election, 28 of the seats had Labour and UKIP candidates in first and second place respectively. But this was not a straight switch from Liberal Democrats to UKIP. Although 18 of the 41 Labour:Liberal Democrat 2010 contests became Labour:UKIP contests five years later, a further 16 became Conservative:Labour contests (the Green party came second to Labour in the other three). The other 16 Labour:UKIP contests were in the Conservative:Labour category in 2010, with UKIP replacing the Conservatives as the main challenger there (in all cases, in northern urban seats). Complementing these changes in the north of England, in the three southern regions outside London, of the seats that became Conservative:UKIP contests in 2015, 52 were contested by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in 2010. UKIP was much weaker in London than elsewhere in the south – perhaps reflecting the capital's multi-ethnic, multi-cultural character. Support for an anti-immigrant party was least where voters were most likely to encounter immigrants. UKIP averaged only 8.2 per cent of the votes across London's 73 constituencies and came second in only five seats, four of them in east London – Barking, Dagenham & Rainham, Hornchurch & Upminster, and Romford – where dominantly Muslim populations are concentrated. (That part of East London also contains major concentrations of non-Commonwealth immigrants: according to the 2011 census, some 30 per cent of the adult population of the East Ham

and West Ham constituencies, for example, had citizenships that meant they were not entitled to vote in UK Parliamentary elections.)

This greater number of contest types retains to a very great extent the characteristic feature of the situation at previous elections: in each type the two leading parties are well ahead of that placed third in their average share of the votes cast. This is the case in the first six rows of Table 5, covering 487 of Britain's constituencies, and to a lesser extent in the seventh row too where on average the third- and fourth-placed parties both got around half of the vote share of the second (Plaid Cymru). The main difference is in the 121 constituencies where UKIP was one of the leading two parties and either the Conservatives and Labour the other. In these, the leading party won on average over half of the votes cast and the second-placed party (UKIP) was not far ahead of the third-.

A changing electoral map II: how competitive are the contests?

The greater complexity of the electoral map is only one of the consequences of the changing pattern of voting on the periphery of Britain's party system. Another, and with greater short- and medium-term consequences, is the change in the competitiveness of seats. This is illustrated by a series of graphs showing the mean share of the votes cast for each party in each contest type after the 2015 election. Figure 3 shows the situation in the fifty constituencies where the Liberal Democrats continue to be the Conservatives' main challengers (the Liberal Democrats won four of them in 2015). On average, the Conservatives had a lead of some 20 percentage points over the Liberal Democrats, with UKIP and Labour coming a poor third and fourth some 15 points behind the Liberal Democrats. Although there was variation around those average positions, the clear conclusion is that the Conservatives dominated most of those constituencies. Even greater dominance is shown in the two groups of seats where UKIP was the main challenger. On average it was some 35 percentage points behind the Conservatives in the first group of 76 seats (Figure 4) and there was a similar gap between UKIP and Labour in the other 44 (Figure 5).

The strong conclusion to be drawn from these three graphs is that very few of those 170 seats are marginal. This is confirmed by the data in Table 6. Constituencies in each type have been categorised into ten groups according to their marginality: a negative margin indicates that the second-named party in the column title won the seat, and a positive one that the first-named was the victor. At recent British general elections, few seats held by a party at the previous contest by a margin of 10 percentage points or more have changed hands, so the marginal seats in Table 6 are those highlighted in bold in the central four rows: the ultra-safe seats, held by majorities of 20 percentage points or more and so very unlikely to be lost, are shown in italics in the top and bottom rows of the table.

In the 50 Conservative:Liberal Democrat contests in 2015, therefore, there were 13 marginal seats, three won by the Liberal Democrats in 2015 and 10 by the Conservatives; 21 of the seats were ultra-safe for the Conservatives, and a further 15 were fairly safe, having a Conservative lead of 10-20 points. This analysis thus makes clear that the potential for a substantial Liberal Democrat revival in terms of seats won in 2020 is slight, unless its vote share in those constituencies increases very substantially.

UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage, said before the 2015 election that although he expected that his party would win some seats, his main goal was to achieve a large number of second places, providing the springboard for further advances next time. Alongside its single victory, UKIP did gain 119 second places, but the data in the second and third columns of Table 6 suggest that very few of them provided the expected springboard; UKIP came within ten percentage points of the winning party in only three constituencies and in 109 it was adrift by 20 percentage points or more.

Marginal seats where either the Liberal Democrats or UKIP provide the main challenge to the two largest parties are therefore very rare in England and Wales after the 2015 general election. There are more marginal seats in the constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour occupied the first two places in 2015, however, as shown in the fourth column of Table 6, although fewer than in 2010; 85 of the 376 were won by one or the other party by less than 10 percentage points in 2015, whereas 206 of those constituencies are categorised as ultra-safe for one or the other. This is a major change from the situation five years earlier, as shown in the final column of Table 6. There were nearly one hundred fewer constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour were the main contestants in 2010 than in 2015, but 119 of the 287 (41 per cent of the total) were classified as marginal – compared to 23 per cent of the 386 after the 2015 contests. Complementing that change, a greater share of the seats contested by those two parties are now ultra-safe: 206 (55 per cent) in 2015 compared to 89 (31 per cent) in 2010. The result is that support for the two main parties is spatially more polarised than at any other election since the Second World War – the continuation of a trend towards greater polarisation that began for the Conservative party in 1955 (Johnston and Pattie, 2015).⁴

What has produced this apparent spatial polarisation of the English and Welsh electorate between those two elections? The growth in the number of ultra-safe seats can largely be accounted for by the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote, which meant that on average the winning party (either Conservative or Labour) in 2010 had a much larger majority in 2015. For example, of the 205 seats contested by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010, 108 were ultra-safe for the Conservatives (a margin of victory of 20 percentage points or more), a further 38 were fairly safe (margins of 10-19 percentage points) and 22 were marginal. Of those 205, 50 remained Conservative:Liberal Democrat contests after the 2015 election, of which 21 were ultra-safe and 15 fairly safe Conservative seats; only 14 were marginal. A further 84 had the Conservatives in first place and Labour in second, and 77 of them were ultra-safe with a further five fairly safe. And in another 63 UKIP came second to the Conservatives – all but one of them were ultra-safe for the latter and the other was fairly safe. In total, therefore, after the 2015 election, 161 of those seats were ultra-safe for the Conservatives, and a further 21 were fairly safe, compared to figures of 108 and 38 respectively five years earlier. A similar change occurred in the 95 seats contested by Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2010, 38 of which produced ultra-safe victories for Labour then and a further 22 fairly safe victories. Only eight of those constituencies had Labour in first place and the Liberal Democrats second in 2015: two were ultra-safe for Labour and another four were fairly safe. A further 48 of the seats became Conservative:Labour contests in 2015, of which 42 were ultra-safe for Labour and another five were fairly safe; and of the 23 seats that became Labour:UKIP contests, 22 were ultra-safe for Labour and the other was fairly safe. In total 66 of those 95 constituencies were ultra-safe for Labour after the 2015 election, compared to 38 five years earlier.

The Liberal Democrat collapse accounts for much of the increase in ultra-safe seats for the Conservative and Labour parties, therefore, but what accounts for the decline in the number (absolute and relative) of Conservative:Labour marginal seats between 2010 and 2015? Table 7 cross-tabulates the marginal condition of each of the 287 Conservative:Labour contests in 2010 with its comparable situation in 2015, using the same marginality categories as Table 6. Of Labour's 59 seats won at the first contest by less than 10 percentage points (rows 4 and 5 in the table), eight were lost to the Conservatives (becoming Conservative-held marginals in 2015) and 24 became safer seats for Labour (i.e. are in the first three columns). And of the 60 seats won by the Conservatives by a similar margin (rows 6 and 7), nine were lost to Labour and 21 became safer (i.e. are in the last three columns). In total, 55 constituencies that were in the most marginal categories in 2010 were not there again in 2015, and they were not replaced at the latter election by seats that were not Conservative:Labour contests in 2010 but were in 2015: only three of those seats were classified as

marginal, and 90 per cent of them – as suggested by the graphs (Figures 4-5) – were ultra-safe (i.e. either the Conservatives or Labour won them by 20 percentage points or more in 2015). Some marginal seats remained so, therefore, but others became safer for the incumbent party, further polarising the country's electoral geography and making change less likely unless there is a substantial alteration in the balance of party support.

There was thus a polarisation of support even within the seats where the Conservatives and Labour occupied the first two places in 2010. This is illustrated by the final two columns in Table 7, which show the mean change in Labour and Conservative vote shares between then and 2015, by constituency marginality. On average Labour's share increased by 1.6 percentage points, but by more than that in four of the five groups of seats that it won in 2010 – and by double that in the seats it was defending with the smallest majorities of less than five percentage points. The Conservative vote share across the 287 seats increased on average by 0.6 percentage points, but by seven times that amount in the most marginal categories (rows 6 and 7 in the table). Thus both parties were able to increase their vote share mostly in the constituencies where it mattered most – hence the small number that changed hands. Much of this can be associated with the first-time incumbency effect. Many of the marginal seats were being defended by MPs who were elected for the first time in 2010; such candidates tend to perform better than their party's average across all seats – being rewarded by their electorates for being active constituency MPs over the period of the Parliament (Norton and Wood 1993; Curtice, Fisher and Ford 2015).

Just as England and Wales have more safe seats after the 2015 general election, so too does Scotland. The SNP's majority was more than 10 percentage points in 50 of the 56 it won, and more than 20 points in 28 of them.

The 2020 general election

The electoral geography of the 2015 outcome has three main elements, therefore, all of which are relevant to the likely outcome of the next scheduled UK general election in 2020:

- A large number of safe seats where one of three parties – Conservative, Labour and the SNP – won by majorities of 10 percentage points or more and is unlikely to lose unless there are substantial changes in the pattern of party support by the next scheduled election in 2020;
- Four parties – Green, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru and UKIP – each have a geography of support which means that they hold only a handful of seats between them and, because where they came second it was in almost every case substantially behind the winning party, have little chance of increasing that number substantially – again unless there are substantial changes in the pattern of party support by 2020; and
- A much-reduced number of marginal constituencies where one of the two largest parties (Conservative and Labour) has a substantial chance of replacing the other and providing the local MP.

American political observers have for some decades been noting the decline in the number of marginal seats as a result of a growing spatial polarisation of the electorate's partisan preferences (Fiorina, 1977; Abramowitz et al., 2006) – resulting in an increasing number of House of Representatives district elections being uncontested. A similar trend with regard to marginal (though not uncontested seats) has been noted for the UK by Curtice (2015): the number where the Conservative share of the votes cast for the two main parties combined fell within the range 45-55 per cent was at its lowest since 1955 at the 2015 election, and as a percentage of all seats had halved since that date. In the House of Commons elected in 2015 Labour was 98 seats behind the Conservatives and yet, as Table 6 shows, there are only 41 seats (widely distributed across England and Wales) where Labour came less than 10 percentage points behind the Conservatives. If it had won all of them in 2015, it would still have been the smaller of the parties by 16 seats.

A Labour victory in 2020 will be difficult to achieve unless the swing towards it is much greater than it has been recently (that between 1992 and 1997 is one of the few exceptions in recent decades), and even then the number of marginal seats now (there were 98 in Curtice's calculations in 1992 compared to 74 in 2015) exacerbates the problem. Such an extrapolation makes a number of assumptions about changes (or lack of them) in voters' preferences between 2015 and 2020, of course. Substantial changes in support for the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the SNP and the Green party between 2010 and 2015 indicate that, even if support for Labour and the Conservatives together remains relatively static, major shifts elsewhere – and the impacts of their geography, as illustrated here – could have a major impact on the election outcome: the core may hold but the periphery shift once again (perhaps as a consequence of the outcome of the promised referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017). Nevertheless, the geography of the 2015 result, as unpacked here, suggests that without a major shift in party preferences substantial change in the composition of the House of Commons will be difficult to achieve.

One change could alter that situation somewhat, although it is unlikely. The constituencies used for the 2015 general election will not be used again in 2020: indeed not only will there be new constituencies but there will also be fewer of them – the next Parliament will have only 600 MPs (584 of them from Great Britain) rather than the current 650 (632 in Great Britain). Believing that the way the current constituency map was compiled discriminated against them, one of the Conservative party's first Bills when it entered government with the Liberal Democrats in 2010 was to change the rules for defining constituencies: the main goal of the new ones – enacted in 2011 – was to ensure that all constituencies were of approximately the same size (on which see Johnston and Pattie, 2012). The Boundary Commissions had virtually finished the task of recommending a new set of 600 constituencies using the new rules in 2013 when Parliament voted to delay the legislation's implementation until after the 2015 general election. A new set of 600 constituencies is to be recommended to Parliament by October 2018, in time to be deployed for the 2020 general election.

It could be argued that this new set of constituencies will be so very different from its predecessor (and analyses of the aborted review indicate that this will indeed almost certainly be the case: Rossiter et al., 2013) that little can be deduced about the 2020 situation from the 2015 map – even if we assume no substantial changes in the pattern of party support.⁵ However, although the cartographic details will vary substantially – relatively few of the new constituencies will have much in common with the current ones – nevertheless the electoral consequences are unlikely to be as substantial. This is because of the new geographies of party support, especially for the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Greens and UKIP all of which have geographical distributions (the first two elements in Gudgin and Taylor's decomposition of the geographical mechanism involved in the translation of seats into votes). Whatever the matrix of constituency boundaries laid down over those geographies (the third of their elements), however, there are likely to be few changes to the ability of the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and UKIP to win seats. After the review, Great Britain's electoral map will still be dominated by ultra-safe and fairly safe seats occupied by Conservative, Labour and SNP MPs. This leaves just the relatively small number of marginal seats, where the Commissions' recommendations (after hearing the representations from the parties and MPs who will be seeking to influence them to their electoral advantage: Johnston et al., 2013) might be influential: they may create slightly more – or slightly fewer – marginal seats, advantaging one of the parties over the other. Overall, however, while the detail might change the basic pattern will not: with the current geography of support for Great Britain's eight parties currently represented in the House of Commons as the bedrock on which the redistribution of constituency boundaries will take place, the general pattern of safe and marginal constituencies is unlikely to be significantly altered.

Conclusions

This analysis of Great Britain's electoral geography after the 2015 general election has shown that the geographical element is more than simply an outcome – a map of who wins where; it is fundamental not only to the creation of that outcome but also to creating the circumstances within which the next election(s) will be fought. The country's electoral map after 2015 is very different from that after previous elections: the changing distribution of votes – and their geography – in the periphery of the party system (i.e. those parties winning less than 15 per cent of the votes each) means not only that they have little chance of electoral success in 2020 but also that the competitive situation between the two largest parties has been substantially altered – much to the benefit of the current largest party. Unless many of those geographies change in the intervening five years, the 2015 result could be replicated in 2020.

A substantial literature on voting patterns in the United States has adopted Key's (1955) classification of both individual and sequences of elections. In this, he defines a 'critical election' as one that involves 'a realignment within the electorate both sharp and durable' (p.11). One cannot know whether a recent election is critical until well after the event: it may only be a deviating election from a general pattern and/or trend that is reinstated at the next election. But the 2015 British election certainly meets one of the immediate criteria for being classified as critical: the changes were certainly sharp, but whether they were durable cannot now be assessed. What this paper has illustrated is the importance of geography in how those sharp changes in the distribution of votes across the smaller parties have been translated into Parliamentary representation. Any further sharp changes are as likely to have strong geographical components and clear geographical outcomes that will be reflected again in the governance of the UK.

Notes

¹ Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies are excluded from all of the analyses in this paper.

² By tradition, the major parties never contest a seat being defended by the incumbent Speaker.

³ We are grateful to Benjamin Hennig and Danny Dorling for providing us with the template for the cartograms.

⁴ Goodwin and Milazzo's (2015, 278-279) analysis of the results shows that in Labour-held (especially safe) seats in northern England UKIP's gains were largely at the Conservatives' expense, whereas in Conservative-held (especially safe) seats in southern England its gains were mainly at Labour's expense – thus contributing further to the expanding number of very safe seats held by one of those two parties.

⁵ It is possible, however, that the introduction of new constituencies could indirectly lead to alterations in a party's policies. In many of them sitting MPs will have to stand for re-selection (this could be mandatory in some parties) and their ideological stances and policy preferences could impact on their party's manifesto commitments and campaigning strategies. This is most likely in the Labour party, whose leader elected in 2015 disagrees with some of his party's previous policies and actions: the leader of the Conservative party has indicated that he will stand down before the 2020 election, and this too could stimulate changes in the party's direction – probably strongly influenced by the result of the EU referendum.

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Table 1. Types of electoral contest after each post-1970 British general election:
number of constituencies in each type

	C:L	C:LD	L:LD	O	Total
1974 (February)	430	145	22	26	623
1974 (October)	448	104	14	55	623
1979	511	98	5	9	623
1983	287	282	52	12	633
1987	331	246	36	20	633
1992	415	161	14	43	633
1997	335	126	124	48	633
2001	413	99	60	45	633
2005	338	126	121	42	627
2010	286	205	95	46	632
2015	376	50	11	195	632

Key: C:L – Conservative and Labour occupied the first two places; C:LD – Conservative and Liberal Democrat occupied the first two places; L:LD – Labour and Liberal Democrat occupied the first two places; O – Other.

Table 2. The mean percentage of the votes cast by the main parties in each seat contest type at the 2010 general election (the number of constituencies in each type is shown in brackets)

<u>Contest type</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>LD</u>	<u>N</u>
Conservative:Labour (286)	37.3	37.8	17.1	0.9
Conservative:Liberal Democrat (205)	48.8	12.7	32.0	0.4
Labour:Liberal Democrat (94)	16.9	44.6	29.7	2.0
Conservative:Nationalist (5)	28.8	16.0	12.4	41.0
Labour:Nationalist (37)	11.9	51.8	11.2	23.2
Liberal Democrat:Nationalist (3)	15.5	11.7	42.2	24.9

Key to parties: C- Conservative; L – Labour; LD – Liberal Democrat; N – nationalist (Plaid Cymru and SNP)

Table 3. Votes and seats at the 2010 and 2015 general elections in Great Britain only
(The first two columns show each party's vote share at the two elections. The remaining columns are a transition matrix showing which parties in 2015 won the seats won by each party in 2010.)

	Vote Share		Seats 2015							2010
	2010	2015	C	L	LD	SNP	PC	UKIP	G	
Conservative	37.0	37.8	295	10	0	0	0	1	0	306
Labour	29.7	31.2	8	210	0	40	0	0	0	258
Liberal Democrat	23.6	8.1	27	12	8	10	0	0	0	57
SNP*	1.7	4.9	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	6
Plaid Cymru**	0.6	0.6	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
UKIP	3.2	12.9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Green	0.7	3.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL***			330	232	8	56	3	1	1	631

Key to parties: C – Conservative; L – Labour; LD – Liberal Democrat; SNP – Scottish National Party; PC – Plaid Cymru; UKIP – United Kingdom Independence Party; G – Green.

* The SNP percentage of the votes cast in Scotland was 20.0 in 2010 and 50.0 in 2015.

** The Plaid Cymru percentage of the votes cast in Wales was 11.2 in 2010 and 12.1 in 2015.

*** The seat held by the Speaker (Buckingham) is excluded

Table 4. The regional distribution of the different contest types
in England and Wales, 2010 and 2015

Contest type		Con:Lab		Con:LD		Lab:LD		C:UKIP	L:UKIP
Region	N	'10	'15	'10	'15	'10	'15	'15	'15
London	73	44	61	10	5	19	2	3	2
Southeast	84	20	37	61	12	1	0	33	0
Southwest	55	13	22	40	20	2	0	11	0
East	58	20	38	37	3	1	1	16	0
East Midlands	46	28	38	14	1	4	0	6	0
West Midlands	59	41	49	12	1	6	1	6	2
Northwest	75	47	57	12	4	16	2	0	10
Northeast	29	14	17	2	1	13	1	0	10
Yorks/Humber	54	32	34	10	1	12	3	1	14
Wales*	40	20	22	2	2	9	1	0	6
TOTAL	573	279	375	200	50	83	11	80	44

Key to contest types: Con:Lab – Conservative:Labour; Con:LD – Conservative:Liberal Democrat;
Lab:LD – Labour:Liberal Democrat; C:UKIP – Conservative:UKIP; L:UKIP – Labour:UKIP.

* In both 2010 and 2015 there were 7 constituencies with Labour and Plaid Cymru occupying the first two places and one each where those places were occupied by Conservatives and Plaid Cymru and by Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru respectively.

Table 5. The mean percentage of the votes cast won by the main parties in each seat contest type at the 2015 general election

	C	L	LD	SNP/PC	UKIP
Conservative:Labour (376)	39.4	37.1	5.2	0.4	13.3
Conservative:Liberal Democrat (50)	45.5	10.9	26.9	0.2	11.4
Labour:Liberal Democrat (11)	13.5	41.8	30.2	0.5	9.0
Conservative:SNP (8)	32.0	10.2	7.4	46.5	2.3
Labour:SNP (42)	12.0	30.2	2.3	52.2	1.4
Liberal Democrat:SNP (9)	10.2	8.5	33.9	43.8	2.1
Labour:PC (7)	14.8	38.4	2.4	28.2	13.7
Conservative:UKIP (77)	53.6	14.5	7.4	0.0	18.8
Labour:UKIP (44)	16.2	53.7	4.0	1.5	20.5
	C	L	LD	SNP/PC	G
Labour:Green (5)	13.7	50.5	7.9	0.0	21.3

Key to parties: C – Conservative; L – Labour; LD – Liberal Democrat; SNP – Scottish National Party; PC – Plaid Cymru; UKIP – United Kingdom Independence Party; G – Green.

Table 6. The margin of victory/defeat, by constituencies after the 2015 election, by contest type – and after both the 2010 and 2015 elections for those constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour occupied first and second places at the relevant election. (The number of constituencies in the marginal categories is shown in bold; the number in the ultra-safe category is shown in italics.)

Margin*	2015			Conservative:Labour	
	Conservative: Liberal Democrat	Conservative: UKIP	Labour: UKIP	2015	2010
-20<	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>49</i>
-15: -20	1	0	0	17	15
-10: -15	0	0	0	23	24
-5: -10	1	1	0	23	38
0: -5	2	0	0	18	21
0: +5	5	0	0	20	33
+5: +10	5	2	1	24	27
+10: +15	9	1	2	28	28
+15: +20	6	3	2	17	11
+20<	<i>21</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>40</i>
TOTAL	50	76	44	376	287

* a negative margin indicates that the first-named party in the column lost the seat in 2015; a positive margin indicates that it won there.

Table 7. Margin of victory in 2010 and 2015 in seats where the Conservatives and Labour came first and second in 2010 using the ten marginality categories of Table 6 (those in the marginal categories at both elections are shown in bold)

Winner in 2010	Labour					Conservative					Mean Vote Change		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Σ	Labour	Con.
1	43	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	2.7	-2.1
2	11	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	15	1.6	-2.2
3	8	6	6	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	24	1.7	-2.0
4	3	6	10	14	3	2	0	0	0	0	38	3.0	-0.6
5	0	1	4	6	4	5	1	0	0	0	21	3.2	1.3
6	0	0	0	0	6	11	13	3	0	0	33	1.9	4.1
7	0	0	0	0	3	1	5	12	4	2	27	0.6	4.3
8	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	9	5	10	28	-0.7	3.1
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	4	11	0.1	0.7
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	37	40	0.5	<u>0.1</u>
Σ	65	16	23	25	19	20	23	28	14	53	287	1.6	0.6

Key to the margins of victory/loss: **1:** -20<; **2:** -15:-20; **3:** -10:-15; **4:** -5:-10; **5:** 0:-5; **6:** 0:+5; **7:** +5:+10; **8:** +10:+15; **9:** +15:+20; **10:** +20<

Figure 1. The percentage shares of the votes cast for and seats won by the Conservative and Labour parties combined, 1945-2015.

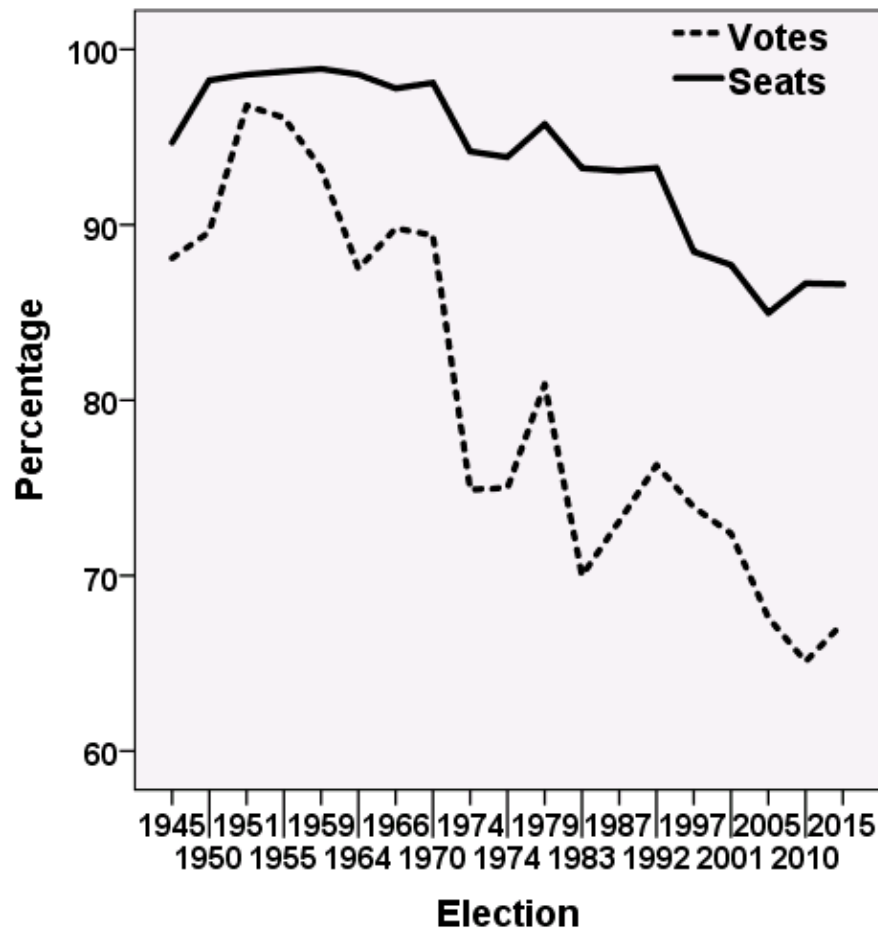


Figure 2a. The distribution of the different constituency contest types after the 2010 general election.

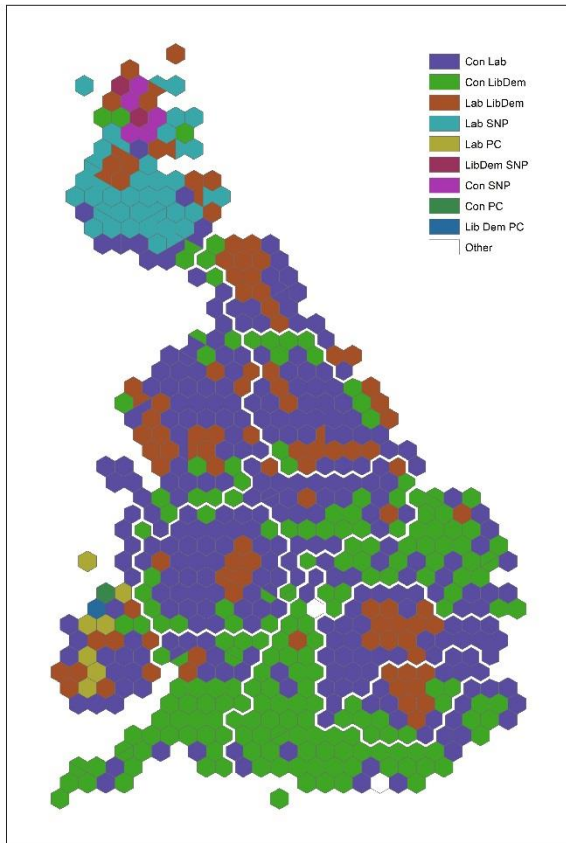


Figure 2b. The distribution of the different constituency contest types after the 2015 general election.

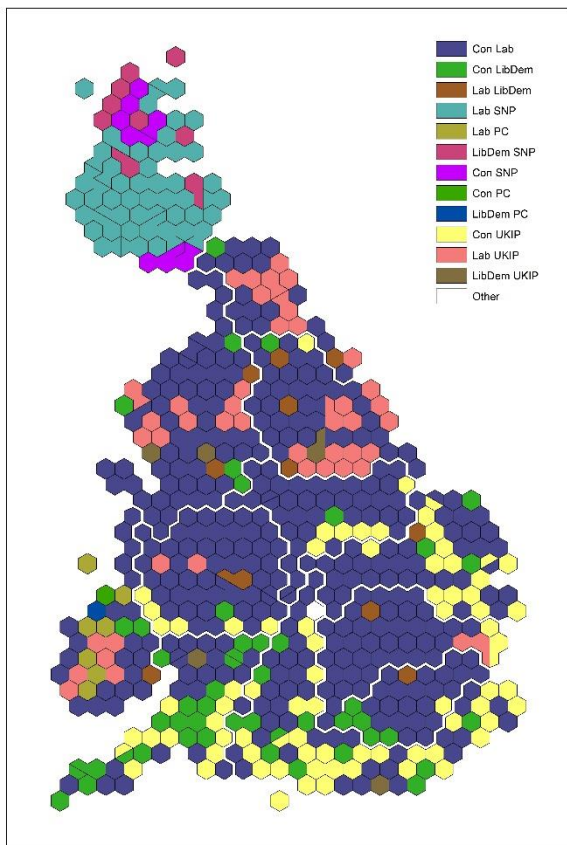


Figure 3. The mean percentage share of the votes cast for each party at the 2015 general election in the 50 constituencies where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats occupied the first two places.

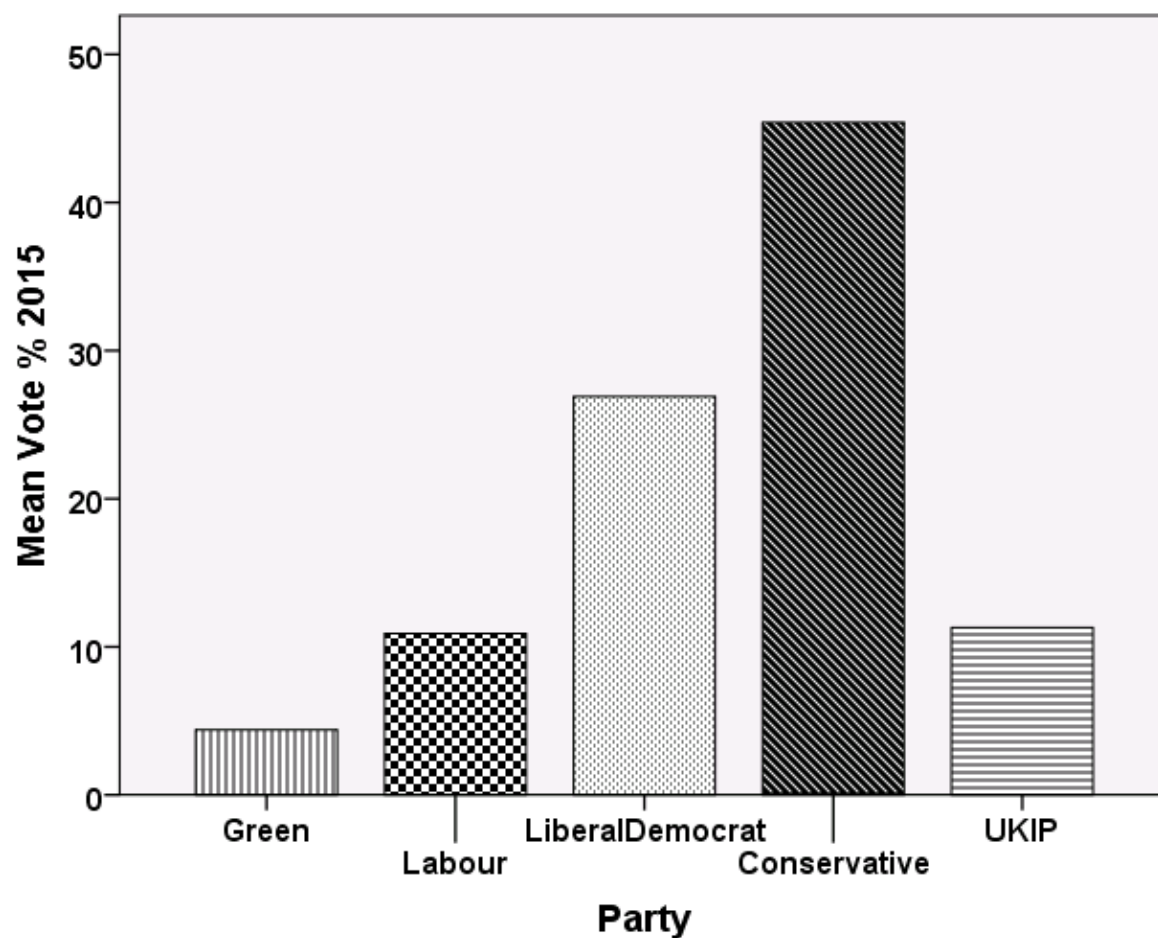


Figure 4. The mean percentage share of the votes cast for each party at the 2015 general election in the 76 constituencies where the Conservatives and UKIP occupied the first two places.

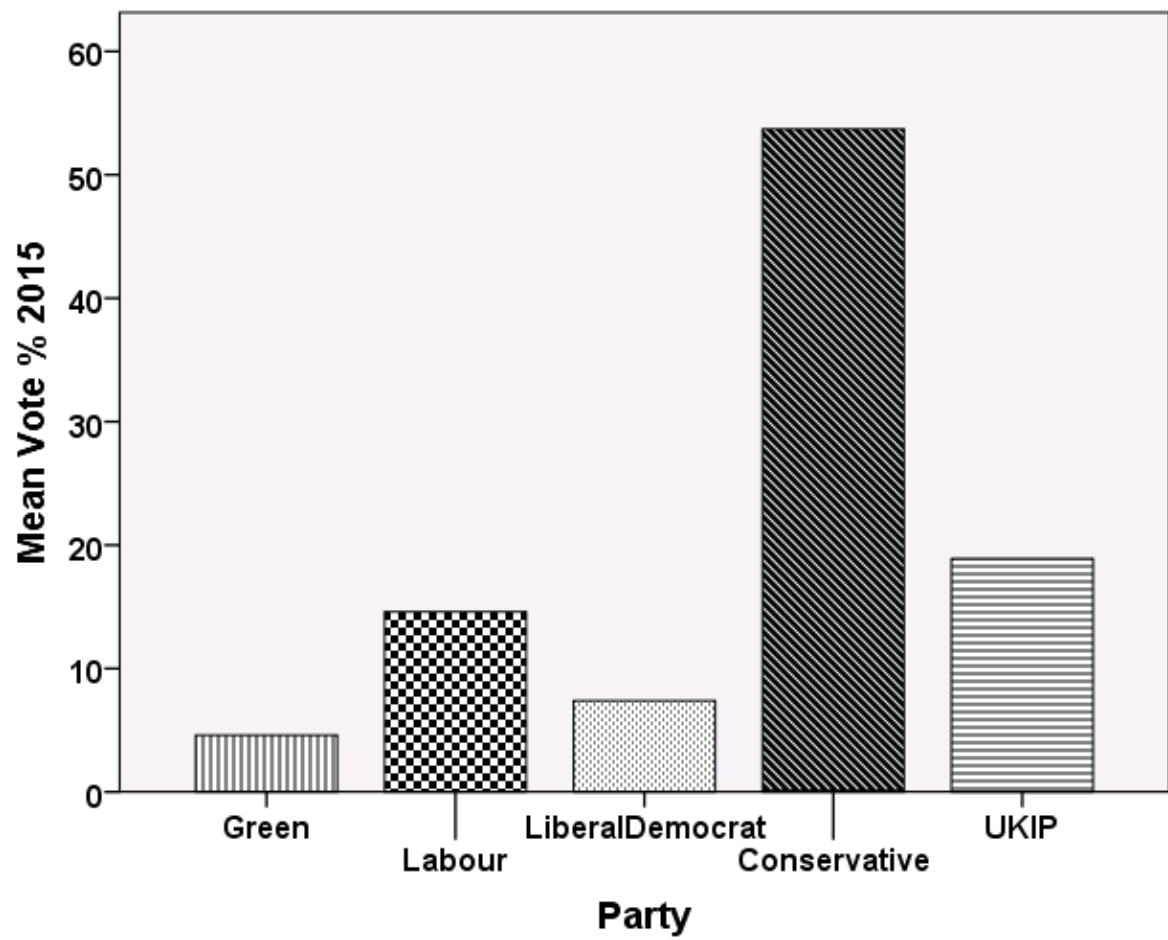


Figure 5. The mean percentage share of the votes cast for each party at the 2015 general election in the 44 constituencies where Labour and UKIP occupied the first two places.

